

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 10AUSA TODAY
27 APRIL 1983

Don't stamp out public information

If Watergate taught us anything, it is that a government obsessed with secrecy should be viewed with skepticism.

Even former President Nixon, a connoisseur of secrecy, conceded that the "classified" rubber stamp was overused when the White House menu had become a secret of state.

Because every administration tries to protect itself from embarrassment, secrecy is a chronic disease. But now it is becoming a malady.

■ Last week, a White House task force recommended that all leaks of classified information by government employees be made a federal crime, punishable by up to three years in jail and \$10,000 in fines.

■ A March 11 presidential directive requires all current and former government employees with access to highly classified information to submit every public statement they make for the rest of their lives to official censors.

■ The same presidential directive forces these employees to take a lie detector test if they are suspected of leaking classified information — or risk being fired.

■ Individual requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act are being unreasonably delayed. A Fordham University professor who requested several paragraphs from the National Archives waited 18 months, only to be told he would have to pay \$1,520 — half in advance.

■ The FBI is pressing Congress to amend the Freedom of Information Act to broadly restrict access to information about organized crime.

■ By executive order, the FBI and CIA have been allowed once again to infiltrate press and academic groups.

If the government were talking about real "secrets" — vital national security information about defense or nuclear weapons — that would be one thing. Instead, the motto is, when in doubt stamp it secret — and classify it the highest level of secrecy possible.

But when public officials are muzzled, so are public issues. When journalists and teachers are compromised by the government, the information you and your children get is no better than what the Soviets get from Tass.

And when "national security" becomes a cover for political embarrassment or wrongdoing, national security becomes trivialized and cheapened.

Congress — no stranger to secrecy itself — now is wrestling with bills to amend the Freedom of Information Act. If there are legitimate loopholes, it should close them. But it should remember past abuses, not endorse them.

An open society is a tug-of-war between those who know secrets and those who don't. But too much secrecy frays the rope. When information is suppressed, the rope snaps — and every American winds up holding the short end.